

World News

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WORLD NEWS

by J.C. Sylvan, Cari Shiffman, Frank Pigott,
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ASIA

TOXIC SPILL AT CHINESE FACTORY HIGHLIGHTS WIDESPREAD RISK OF SPILLS IN CHINA

Since an explosion on November 13, 2005 at Jilin Petrochemical Corporation's benzene factory in the northeastern city of Harbin, 45 other pollution accidents were reported to China's State Environmental Protection Administration ["SEPA"],¹ including six "major disasters."² The Harbin explosion poured one hundred tons of the carcinogenic benzene and nitrobenzene into the Songhua River in a plume of contaminated water 150 kilometers long.³ Ten thousand people were evacuated⁴ and four million people had no public water services for several days.⁵ On February 14, 2006, another major spill in the Yuexi River left 20,000 residents of the Sichuan village of Guanyin without water when high concentrations of fluorine, amine-nitrate, and phenol were discovered in the river.⁶

The Harbin spill raised national concern in China about the damage China's industrial boom may be inflicting on the environment.⁷ In response, SEPA has demanded that officials report spills within an hour of their outbreak.⁸ SEPA's own director Xie Zhenhua was forced to resign when officials failed to report the spill for three days, resulting in dozens of lawsuits.⁹ Moreover, in a recent nationwide survey, SEPA found that China has 21,000 chemical plants situated on its major rivers.¹⁰ Over 70 percent of China's rivers and lakes are polluted; water sources in 90 percent of cities are contaminated.¹¹

AMERICAS

INCREASED MOVEMENT OF GREENLAND'S GLACIERS MAY INDICATE CLIMATE CHANGE

Researchers at the University of Kansas and National Aeronautics and Space Administration's ("NASA") Jet Propulsion Laboratory recently released a study revealing that the rate of ice streaming into the sea from glaciers in Greenland has doubled in the past decade, in part due to climate warming and ice dynamics.¹² Through the use of satellite data to follow the glaciers,¹³ the researchers indicated that widespread increased glacier movement is "clearly a climate signal."¹⁴ Greenland's glaciers lost 59 trillion gallons of ice in 2005, as compared to 24 trillion gallons in 1996, and Greenland's largest glaciers have increased their speeds by approximately 57 percent over the past decade.¹⁵

The study further reveals that the ice dumped from these glaciers may be contributing more to rising sea levels than previously predicted.¹⁶ Streaming ice, together with the melting of Greenland's ice sheet, may annually contribute to seventeen percent of the global sea-level increase.¹⁷ This contribution to the global sea-level rise "is a problem of considerable societal and scientific importance."¹⁸ With the possibility of rising global temperatures, the contribution to sea-level rise from Greenland's glaciers will likely continue to increase.¹⁹

RISING ETHANOL DEMAND BOOSTS BRAZIL'S SUGAR CANE INDUSTRY

Due to rising ethanol demand, Brazil's state-run oil company, Petroleo Brasileiro SA ("Petrobras"), has announced the possibility of building an ethanol pipeline through Brazil's primary ethanol producing areas to a refinery located near São Paulo. The estimated price tag would be US\$226 million and would transport one billion gallons of ethanol per year.²⁰ Petrobras Chief Executive Sergio Gabrielli stressed that ethanol is cheaper to produce in Brazil, whose current ethanol supplies derive from sugar cane, than in the United States, which produces its ethanol from corn.²¹ Gabrielli further contended that Brazil is "the only country in the world that has the technology to build an ethanol pipeline," thus making the project significant for the global ethanol market.²²

Some industry analysts question Brazil's ability to emerge as a consistent ethanol supplier in the global fuels market.²³ While Brazil's sugar cane industry is the largest in the world,²⁴ its supplies are currently stretched, and the sugar cane industry is projected to need US\$10 billion investment capital for new mills and more sugar cane to meet ethanol demands.²⁵ The International Energy Agency predicts that by 2025 ethanol may account for ten percent of the global gasoline supply, as countries begin to increasingly look to ethanol as a fuel source,²⁶ either to meet carbon dioxide emissions targets set by the Kyoto Protocol or to break from oil dependencies.²⁷ Brazil can serve as an example for other countries wanting to switch to ethanol-based fuel, as Brazilian laws require that its domestic gasoline contain 25 percent ethanol and as the majority of Brazilian vehicles currently are able to use either ethanol or traditional gasoline sources.²⁸

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AFRICA

SECURITY PROBLEMS HAMPER AID EFFORTS IN SOMALIA

As southern Somalia faces its worst drought in more than a decade, security issues have hampered aid efforts there.²⁹ Rainfall, cereal production, and pastoral land have all approached seven-year lows,³⁰ while famine threatens more than two million people in the region, including 400,000 internally displaced people.³¹ Moreover, since March 2005 some 35 acts of piracy in Somali waters, including the hijacking of a vessel chartered by the World Food Programme,³² have forced aid agencies to deliver food by land, where it is vulnerable to seizure by local militias.³³ Making things worse, Somalia has had no central government to enforce the rule of law for fifteen years, allowing rival warlords to loot the country and fuel internal conflicts.³⁴

EUROPE

WTO REJECTS EU'S BAN ON BIOTECH CROPS

This February, the World Trade Organization ("WTO") ruled in favor of the United States, Argentina, and Canada that the European Union illegally banned imports of genetically modified crops.³⁵ European governments resisted the use of genetically altered seeds to resist pests, disease, and drought, claiming that biotech crops threaten human health and the environment.³⁶ However, the ruling might not signal immediate changes in the EU's policies since the EU can appeal or simply refuse to comply and accept the requisite penalties.³⁷

The EU has a history of disregarding WTO decisions that conflict with its food policies.³⁸ For example, in 1998 the WTO ruled that the EU's ban on hormone treated beef, based on a heightened cancer risk, was not sufficiently rooted in science.³⁹ However, the EU opted to pay US \$116 million in fines rather than comply with the WTO's beef ruling.⁴⁰ According to an EU poll, over fifty percent of the EU's 450 million consumers consider gene-engineered foods to be dangerous.⁴¹

EUROPE'S QUEST FOR OIL INDEPENDENCE

Britain and Sweden have set lofty goals to reduce oil consumption. For instance, Sweden plans to be a completely oil-free economy by 2020.⁴² A Swedish government official stated, "The plan is a response to global climate change, rising petroleum prices, and warnings by some experts that the world may soon be running out of oil."⁴³ Sweden leads Europe in the race for oil independence with 26 percent of its energy coming from renewable sources (the EU averages six percent). Only 32 percent of Sweden's energy comes from oil, down from 77 percent in 1970.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Britain plans to meet its Kyoto obligation of reducing emissions twenty percent by 2010 by using the three million tons of excess wheat it produces each year to make bioethanol.⁴⁵ However, Britain's plan could prove costly, as bioethanol is twice as costly as gasoline production, and could likely prove viable only with the help of government subsidies.⁴⁶ In addition, petrochemical companies own many of Britain's gas stations and have little interest in endorsing a product that would reduce their sales.⁴⁷ Yet, the British government recently ordered that petrochemical companies make a certain portion of their products (close to three percent) from renewable resources.⁴⁸

MIDDLE EAST

YEMEN ON VERGE OF WATER CRISIS

Yemen, one of the most water scarce countries in the world, is on the verge of a water crisis.⁴⁹ The water table in Yemen is falling by more than two meters a year.⁵⁰ Additionally, Yemen's population is one of the fastest growing in the world, compounding the problems of a water shortage.⁵¹ Yemeni engineers suggest that additional desalination plants could be built along the coastline to augment the potable water supply.⁵² A national plan announced in 2004 for 2005-2009 calls for confronting the shortage through a mixture of legal and political measures, as well as privatization and investment.⁵³ Observers are skeptical that the plan can be implemented, especially since Yemen lost part of its funding from the World Bank⁵⁴ and was suspended from the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation's Threshold Program in late 2005, both citing corruption.



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